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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1721
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RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE VIENNA AU
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SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND SCA/PPD

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SUBJECT: Local Media Reaction to Incident at Manas Airport

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Local media reaction to the September 26 incident involving a U.S. KC-135 Stratotanker and a Kyrgyz Airlines TU-135 has largely been restrained, by local standards. Some outlets have played up the fact that the Kyrgyz plane involved in the accident occasionally transports President Bakiyev. Some outlets have placed the blame with the U.S., but most have kept reporting largely factual. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Pro-government Vechernyi Bishkek, the largest paper in Kyrgyzstan, has published diagrams of the accident and has confined its reporting to facts. The paper interviewed a passenger on the TU-154 who said that at the time of impact, the plane "shook, as if a car hit a hole at high speed." The passenger reported that stewards began serving soft drinks, and it was only when the plane returned to the airport did the passengers realize what had happened.

¶3. (U) Pro-government Komsomolskaya Pravda, which publishes news from both Russia and Kyrgyzstan, interviewed a TU-154 pilot who happened to be at Manas airport at the time of the accident. The pilot described the factual detail of the incident, but adding the detail that the runway at Manas has a large bump in it, limiting pilot's vision. Opposite the article written in Bishkek, a similar article written from Russia appeared. The only real difference between the two was that the Russia-based article was shorter.

¶4. (U) Pro-government MSN reported that a governmental commission has been formed to study the incident. While the paper also reports the facts of the accident, it also quotes a local non-governmental organization that calls on the leaders of Kyrgyzstan to "reconsider in the shortest term" the agreement between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Manas Airbase in order to "maximize" the safety of the citizens of the country.

¶5. (U) Pro-government Obshestvennyi Reyting also largely reported the same facts reported elsewhere, but praised the skill of the pilots of the TU-154 in ensuring that there were no injuries or loss of life during this incident.

¶6. (U) Pro-government Slovo Kyrgyzstana also reported the facts of the incident accurately. However, the paper also declared on September 29 that the crew of the KC-135 were at fault in the incident. Slovo Kyrgyzstana also quotes Manas Airbase Commander COL Reese that the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan are going to conduct separate but parallel investigations of the incident.

¶7. (U) The new anti-American Megapolice newspaper also declares that the American pilot was at fault for the incident. The paper quotes the Director of the Civil Aviation Department saying that the air traffic controllers were not at fault. He also goes on to say that recordings of conversations between the planes and the controllers are being transcribed. In another article, a writer claims that fuel dumping by pilots based at Manas Airbase is continuing. The writer says that 35 people have been poisoned by eating mushrooms tainted by fuel, with six children having died.

¶8. (U) In opposition Belyi Parohod, an article appears about how American pilots regularly disobey the directions of the Kyrgyz air traffic controllers. They cite an example of an American pilot being denied permission to land, but landing anyway. In another case, they cite a time when an American plane stopped on the runway and turned off all external lights theorizing that it was done to "check the nerves of the controllers."

¶9. (SBU) Comment: The relatively muted reaction of Kyrgyz media so far has been surprising. The media here thrive on conspiracy theories and most can find ways to blame the

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United States for almost anything under the sun. To date, reporting has largely been factual and restrained. While some outlets have already decided who is at fault in this incident, it would have been expected that many more would have preordained the results of the investigation. Unfortunately, this restraint is most likely not a sign of a maturing media environment. More likely, this is an example of the media echoing the restrained response of the government. End comment.

Yovanovitch